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BEAUTY & THE BREAST
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VOGUE JULY 1986

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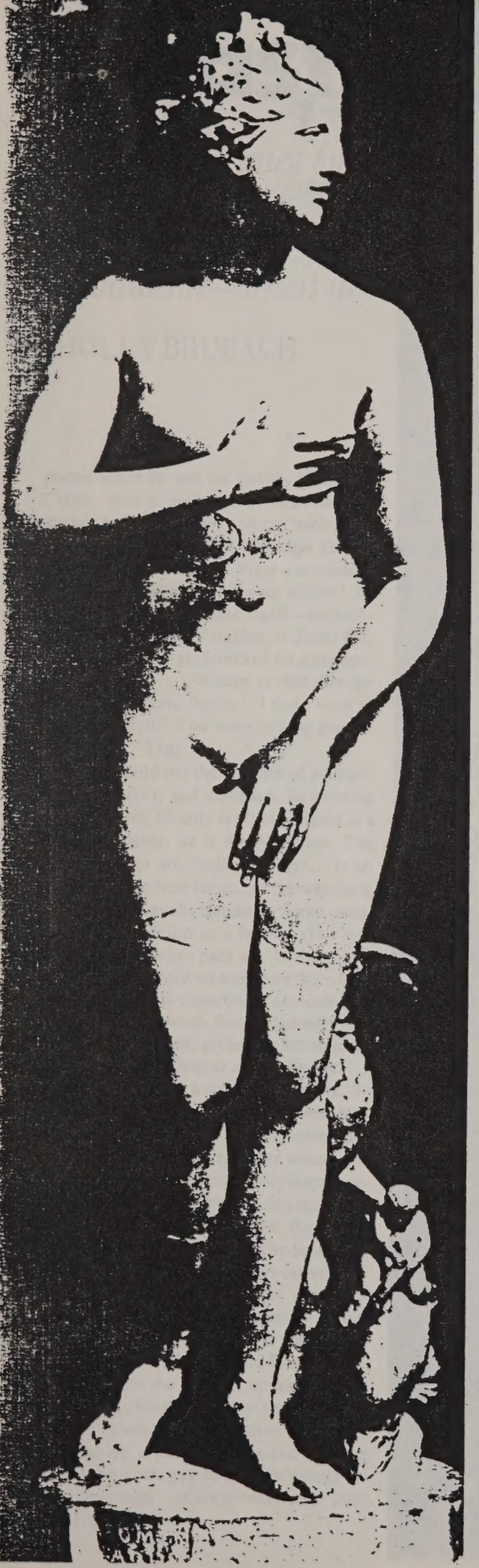

BEAUTY & the

Breasts are back—emphasized by fashion, perfect bodies, envied by the not-so-well endowed of the less-is-more esthetic—and centuries about our fascination with voluptuousness?

It seems to me lately that breasts are getting larger. Fifteen years ago, Twiggy, Edie Sedgwick, the Shrimpton sisters, and other 1960s-style teenage gamines, seen in profile, had only a barely perceptible rise on their chests. Today, Christie Brinkley, Jerry Hall, Kim Basinger, Jessica Lange, and Jamie Lee Curtis exude a sex appeal in which their breasts play a considerable part. On *Dynasty*, Joan Collins displays her breasts as if bra-cup size were a measure of personal magnificence. Ann and Nancy Wilson, the lead singers of Heart, proudly aim their cleavage directly at the camera in the video of their hit song "Never," ranked number one for seven weeks running by viewers who called in their votes to MTV's "Friday Night Video Fights." Norma Kamali has by popular demand added a new, larger size in the bras she makes. Eileen Ford, co-founder of Ford Models, admits that breast implants are "epidemic" at her agency: in the past six months, ten of her models have had their breasts enlarged—"without my encouragement," she adds. Once again, the ideal female form has come around to that of a more mature woman who has what the French piquantly call *du monde au balcon*—a lot of people on the balcony.

Certain well-endowed women have always found an audience regardless of the fashions of the time, and the impressions left by their breasts are indelible: In the 1953 movie version of *Aida*, Sophia Loren's perfectly engineered pyramids, which seem to start at her clavicle, nominate themselves as two of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World to which all Egypt comes to worship. In *Psycho*, in 1960, Janet Leigh's breasts are immovable, armor-like, preceding her everywhere she goes. Jill St. John, in *Diamonds Are Forever*, in 1971, is invariably clad in a bikini (no matter what the occasion and what everyone else is wearing), her pillowy breasts suspended in her bra as in a sling. And, more recently, on the 1985 cover of *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue, top model Paulina Porizkova, a pin-up girl for the 'eighties, displayed breasts that look vigorous and springy.

According to Anne Hollander, an art historian and the author of *Seeing Through Clothes*, "breasts mean everything good." Men seem to think so, and, if Philip Roth is any indication, they wish they had them, too. In *The Breast*, an appalling novel about a university professor who undergoes a hormonal explosion and turns into a giant breast, blind but capable of hearing through his nipple, Roth writes of the professor reliving a time before his metamor-

It was the breast of times: The "Medici Venus" (left), in an attitude of Hellenistic modesty; Burt Glinn's Las Vegas sun worshippers (above), in 1969, when if you had it, you flaunted it; the "Venus of Willendorf" (right), a tiny Stone Age fertility figure with monumental proportions.

breast

enobled by our quest for

After two decades

of ambivalence—what's new

BY HOLLY BRUBACH

phosis when he and his buxom girlfriend, Claire, were at the beach: "I lean back on the hot sand, dig down with my heels, shut my eyes, and wait with open lips for her breast to fill my mouth. What a sensation, there with the sea booming below! As though it were the globe itself—suckable soft globe!—and I Poseidon or Zeus! Oh, nothing beats the pleasures of the anthropomorphic god. . . . 'Where is that strange thing? Yes, again, again.' 'I don't want to cut off your air. You were turning green.' 'With envy,' I say."

Breasts hold out the promise of nourishment, comfort, and salvation. In painting and sculpture, Charity is often depicted as a nursing mother, as is the Madonna. The bare breast in art, Hollander says, "is an icon. A single bare breast, all the way back to antiquity, usually denotes a fierce woman who is a victim or a heroine. Her one bare breast always puts her in the moral right." The woman who appears this way is altruistic, unself-conscious, unaware that her breast is exposed. She is zealously embarked on a mission, protecting her children or defending her faith or saving France.

Breasts are also a sign of fecundity, an open invitation to men to come and sow their seed. The Venus of Willendorf is a prehistoric stone fertility figure whose distinguishing feature is her grossly disproportionate watermelon-shaped breasts. The surface of her head is textured; she has no eyes, no nose, no mouth. "Why hasn't she got a face?" one bewildered art-history student at a New York university asked her professor, a woman in her sixties. "Honey," the professor replied, "if you had tits like that, you wouldn't need a face either."

The bigger the breasts, apparently, the louder and clearer their message. In the interest of journalistic objectivity, I considered buying a pair of falsies and wearing them for a week, just to see how people react to a woman *(Continued on page 206)*

Details last pages

(Continued) with big breasts, the way John Howard Griffin in the late 1950s had his skin dyed in order to experience racial discrimination firsthand for his book *Black Like Me*. *Buxom Like Me*. But instead I polled the men I know. They insisted that size is immaterial, that small breasts can be just as arousing as large ones, that men today are more enlightened than to fall for a woman on the basis of the size of her chest. Well, I thought, that's gratifying. But then I talked with a few women better endowed than I, who said that men had admitted to them that big breasts are in fact what men really want deep down. "When I'm thinking about fashion," Norma Kamali says, "I think of perky little firm breasts that can go braless and not bounce or hang, and then I talk to men and realize that they like big tits." It's possible that the men I talked to were being charitable. Or maybe men lie, egged on by one another to admire ever-bigger breasts as an index of their own virility.

Regardless, there is in our society a billion-dollar industry in erotica, rife with pictures of breasts that look to me and, I dare say, to most women grotesque—abnormal and unnatural, overinflated, like water balloons about to burst—and yet look to the men who buy these images attractive and arousing. According to Dale Harris, a professor of art history at Cooper Union, "The pendulous breasts that so excite the *Playboy* and *Penthouse* people"—to say nothing of the readers of *Juggs*, which bills itself "The World's Dirtiest Tit-Mag"—are akin to the large phallus. "They are exact counterparts, on a scale we know to be ridiculous. Nonetheless, they serve as an erotic stimulus." The word that comes immediately to my mind when looking at these images is *boob*, which we employ as slang for *breast* (its second definition in my dictionary), but which also means "a stupid or foolish person; simpleton; dolt" (its first definition). The women featured in pornography are depicted in such a way as to seem wholly inviting, unlikely to give anyone an argument. The camera zeroes in on their breasts; the expressions on their faces are not knowing or ironic but blank. Their physical attributes are the limits of their individuality.

But size evidently isn't everything to all men. Shape also has its paragons and its adherents. Over the course of human history breasts have been made to assume a variety of forms, from round to flat to cone shaped, squeezed together or "lifted and separated" (as ads for the Playtex Cross Your Heart bra used to promise) or, currently, free-floating. The Empress Josephine, whose beautiful bosom and thick middle reputedly inspired the Empire waistline, had breasts so exquisitely formed that, it is said, the classic Champagne goblet was molded to their contour. Painters throughout history have favored small- to medium-sized breasts, firm and round, alabaster with a slight blush of pink. Even in instances when large breasts might have been justified, painters and sculptors often eschewed them. Portraits of whores, which tended to be painted in a more erotic style than those of aristocratic women, reveal breasts that are well shaped but not huge; the reason being, I imagine, that breasts—or, for that matter, a nose or feet—that are disproportionately large would distract the viewer from the picture as a whole. There are classic antique figures of plenty that have, instead of two large breasts, many small breasts running up and down the torso.

At first

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1. Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People," 1831. 2. Jane Russell, in "The Outlaw," 1941. 3. "La Nature," by Le Tribolo, 1527. 4. "Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters," circa 1595. 5. Theda Bara, in "Cleopatra," 1917. 6. Dolly Parton, in "Rhinestone," 1985. 7. Fouquet's "The Virgin of Melun," circa 1450. 8. Audrey Hepburn, in "Two for the Road," 1967. 9. Anjette Funicello, in "Beach Blanket Bingo," 1963.

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BEAUTY & THE BREAST

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glance, it would seem that Champagne goblets and "jugs" have nothing in common, suggesting that the esthetic and the erotic are two distinctly different standards. But Hollander contends that "In any century, you can link art with the pornography and erotica of the time—high art and low art are never that far apart. In order for either to work, it must relate to everybody's notion of what is sexy and what is delicious."

Our agreed-upon notions of what is erotic can also encompass what is taboo or dangerous. As Cleopatra, Theda Bara, whose name is an anagram for "Arab death," wore a costume with what looked like a snake coiled around each breast. Lucas Cranach the Elder in several paintings equated breasts with apples, and therefore with the apple Eve offered Adam and with the Original Sin, the Fall of Man. Ingres painted the Sphinx with breasts. Rubens painted Delilah with her breasts bared and Samson, shorn of his strength, at her feet, his head in her lap.

Breasts are perhaps empowered to pose a threat to a man because they are of such primal importance to infants. Sigmund Freud suggested that there could be no underestimating their significance. "Sucking at the mother's breast is the starting point of the whole of sexual life, the unmatched prototype of every later sexual satisfaction, to which phantasy often enough recurs in times of need. . . . I can give you no idea of the important bearing of this object upon the choice of every later object, of the profound effects it has in its transformations and substitutions in even the remotest regions of our sexual life."

Recent feminist theorists, notably Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, suggest that the challenge for a boy growing up is to separate himself from his mother for the sake of his sexual identity. A girl can afford to remain more attached because she is of the same sex: she will grow up to be what her mother is, a woman. The boy's task is one of differentiation; the girl's is one of connection. Breasts, in that they recall the infantile oral attachment to the mother, perhaps undermine a boy's hard-won autonomy, and so arouse in him feelings both erotic and hostile, feelings that are seemingly never outgrown.

It is generally agreed that we American women are more obsessed with our breasts than European women are, and that men here are more fixated on breasts than men there. It is said that the American male's sexual development suffers from a national case of Mom-ism, the cult of motherhood. Europeans are thought to be more adult in their sexuality, more sybaritic, and more avid in pursuit of pleasure, whereas until recently, we routinely denied ourselves pleasure or indulged in it and felt guilty all the while.

The difference in attitude lies in part with our sense of shame, which may be uncommonly strong since our moral legacy is one of Puritanism. Breasts to us, Hollander says, are "part of the hidden genitals," hidden from view for so long that a mere glimpse of them has become a goal in itself. In France, a woman about to undergo a routine physical examination awaits the doctor stark naked; there is no "modesty drape" with which she covers herself. What we call a "tidbit" is in England called a "titbit"; we have changed one letter so as not to say a dirty word.

But it would be foolish to assume that breasts in Europe aren't sexual. Of course they are. They just don't seem to be the focus of a woman's sexual identity as they are for many American women. It has occasionally been argued—persuasively, I think—that sex appeal in European terms relies more on the harmony of the whole than on the impact of the parts. At the court of Fontainebleau, in the sixteenth century, aristocratic women were painted with their breasts bare. A woman's portrait documented her features, her breasts among them. For all intents and purposes, society then defined a woman's "face" as encompassing her breasts, which were often whitened, with the nipples rouged.

Why is it that Europeans seem so nonchalant when confronted with bare breasts, while Americans are so abashed at the sight of them? Why do we have so few topless beaches, while in Europe there are dozens? Anne Cole, now an executive vice-president of the California swimwear house her father founded, observes that "in Europe the breast is no more erotic than the leg or any other part of the body." Cole says that the difference

in attitude didn't dawn on her, even seeing scores of women topless on the beach in France, until lunchtime "when they all sat around wiping salad dressing off their breasts."

Recalling her clinical research with breast-cancer patients in a hospital in Dijon, France, Diana D. Bransfield, Ph.D., now a science associate in cancer control and prevention at the National Cancer Institute in Maryland, says that most of the French women she interviewed apparently didn't regard their breasts as the primary instruments of their sexuality; many of them seemingly considered the uterus to be at its core. French women undergoing hysterectomies were commonly more fearful of losing some crucial part of their identity as women than French women undergoing lumpectomies with radiation treatment. Jimmie Holland, M.D., chief of psychiatry at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, in Manhattan, says that some of the women she sees say, "I feel like damaged goods," a complaint Bransfield never heard in France. Holland says, "Our society has placed so much emphasis on breasts that it has made the treatment of breast tumors particularly difficult." For most American women, mastectomy at first results in diminished sexual activity, although, according to Holland, "By a year after surgery, the majority have returned to their normal level of sexual function." Bransfield says that breast cancer and its treatment "disrupted French women's sexual relationships very little, if at all. And there wasn't the secrecy about it that there often is here." In addition to interviewing patients, she surveyed their partners and found that "the men seemed very accepting as well."

There is, according to Anne Hollander, "some bargain between the sexes that is always being described by fashion." But fashion is also a project that we women engage in for the sake of ourselves and one another. To the extent that we have been an oppressed class, we have, like other oppressed classes, devised our own means of communication and support, leaving our oppressors on the outside. Fashion has been for us a pastime, an everyday outlet for our ingenuity and creativity. We aspire to a style of dress or an ideal body type that we can all understand, that takes as its basis some fantasy we all share. These fantasies are constantly shifting; they vary from one decade, one year, one month, or even one week to the next. Changes in fashion—and in fashion models—reflect the subtle changes in our dreams, in a language, both verbal and visual, that other women understand. Men in most cases get the gist of it but miss its nuances. One woman can look at the way another woman is dressed and deduce from it how much they might have in common. Men, it seems safe to say, respond less to fashion itself than to women's bodies and what fashion reveals about them.

The romanticism of the 'sixties took the form of personal freedom and self-discovery. The ideal woman was—to our minds—prepubescent looking, wide-eyed, and uninitiated, on the verge of awakening. The realm of androgyny, that grey territory between the genders, seemed to hold out answers for us all: by shattering the old male female stereotypes, we would arrive at a more harmonious, more fully realized notion of the self. Breasts, being overtly feminine, were extra baggage. What was going on in the world and in our minds at the time prompted us to look and dress a certain way; and men, whether or not they could appreciate the way we looked, almost certainly couldn't decipher it. Their ideal woman all this time bore little, if any, resemblance to the ideal we had set for ourselves. No matter. Society proved capacious enough to embrace both the standard by which Twiggy could be considered sexy and that by which Jill St. John could be considered an actress.

The 'sixties' quest for freedom, in the course of which some women burned their bras as symbols of male domination, dovetailed with the women's movement, of the 1970s. Droves of women enrolled in law school, went to work, ran for office, and came to regard their own breasts as suspect, as a possible obstacle to being taken seriously. The clothes we wore were soft and unconstructed. Women appropriated men's shirts, ties, hats, and vests, as Diane Keaton did in *Annie Hall*, and set out for the office dressed for success. Having unobtrusive breasts conveniently catapulted one's relations with men into the realm of the platonic or the intellectual, bypassing the sexual. Like the Amazons, women warriors who cut off one of their breasts in order to shoot more freely with their bows and arrows, we were not about to let our breasts interfere with the attainment of our goals. We postponed motherhood, of which breasts are an emblem, until we were established in our careers.

And now, not too surprisingly, all that has begun to change. Many of the women who went off to work are getting around to having children. Androgyny seems, at least for the time being, an exhausted notion. Men and women are in pursuit of fitness, working out, wearing clothes that show off their hard-earned physiques. Women have rediscovered strapless dresses and the closely fitted hourglass silhouette. We live in an era of body worship. Breasts are in this respect, I think, the visual counterpart of biceps. It's hard to picture a pumped-up hunk of man like Sylvester Stallone with a flat-chested woman.

Our lives have changed a good deal since the days when we were all required to play beach blanket bingo. But maybe our feelings about our breasts haven't. Many women are still quick to feel apologetic about the size of their breasts whether large or small. And we are not, it must be said, above comparing breasts in competing with one another. One friend, a late bloomer, set out on a date with her sister's incredulous parting remark ringing in her ears: "Somebody asked you out with your two fried eggs?!" Another, ample breasted, once remarked to me on leaving the swimming pool, "Did you see that woman in the corner? Poor thing, she has no bosom whatsoever"—the point being that, at the time, neither did I. We have at times allowed breasts, which are undoubtedly important to the way men see us, to become paramount to the way we see ourselves. We are, all of us, astonishingly capable of underestimating the impact of a woman's voice, her skin and eyes and hair, her sensibility, her laugh, her gestures, the way she carries herself. There is, finally, no unanimous standard by which society judges some women more feminine than others. Every woman, big breasted and flat chested alike, must conceptualize her own femininity. ▽